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ABSTRACT

Language is a complex social event. The rules determining its use vary with (1) the language field--the subject, text, and purpose; (2) the tenor of the social interaction; and (3) the mode or type of communication being used. The impact of the field, tenor, and mode on language use is reflected in a college student's retelling of a story to a university professor in his office, her family at dinner, and a friend while walking to lunch. Analysis revealed that of the three narratives, the retelling to the professor was the briefest, had the shortest idea units (usually single clauses punctuated by a rise in voice and a brief pause), and showed the fewest centers of interest (the oral equivalent of paragraphs). It also had the largest number of stalling devices. A comparison of stories a poor language user told in two distinct settings suggests the impact of past experience on present language use. While creating a vivid, complex story in what he perceived as a social situation, the student showed increased hesitancy, decreased mean length of idea units, and fewer and less well developed centers of interest in a story told for more obviously instructional purposes. These observations suggest that teachers need to provide students with a wide variety of authentic writing and reading opportunities. Writing pen pals, writing or reading to younger students, and reading trade materials acquaint students with the real uses of language as it occurs in their world. (MM)

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Dealer's Choice:
The Language Processing Game

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Dealer's Choice: The Language Processing Game

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Using language is a lot more like poker than Monopoly. This is not because real money is used with poker rather than play money. Nor is it because poker is generally played by adults and Monopoly by kids. Rather, we would contend that processing both oral and written language is more like playing poker than Monopoly because both poker and language have almost limitless sets of rules to play by. Poker, according to Hoyle, has at least nineteen written sets of rules. But a poker-playing friend of ours suggests there are many times that number of different poker games if we count all the different sets of rules concocted on the spur of the moment as well as those "house rules" used only by a certain few "regulars". Ultimately, the rules that govern either a particular hand of poker or an entire game are determined by the players and the situation in which the game occurs - in short, by the total setting.

The process of language in use, unlike Monopoly, does not involve a simple set of context-free "rules" that can be developed by persons external to and not involved with the particular "game" in question, and then neatly listed in a brochure for everyone to follow. Language is a complex social event, and language users always play the game according to the particular rules which apply at that very instant--rules that are determined primarily by the kind of language being used, the situation, the particular people involved, and their relationships with the language user. When any of these features of the language setting are changed, the rules which language users follow are also changed. However, as in poker, some aspects of the language game remain constant: the availability of interactive graphophonemic, syntactic, and semantic cues in reading, for example, are as constant as a full house beating a pair of aces. Another constant is the awareness and active involvement of language users in this process, regardless of their age or their educational history. The following case studies serve to illustrate the kinds of transactions (Rosenblatt, 1978) among the language user, the text, and the context that characterize language as a social event (Harste & Carey, 1979).

A friend of ours has a son who recently read a story about a sick giraffe from which this excerpt was taken.

> Then she wrapped a towel round and round his neck and put him to bed. "Now, maybe I can have some peace," she said. When Bertram's father came home from a business trip, he sniffed and said, "I smell goose grease." He hated goose grease!
>
> "The giraffe has a sore throat," explained Bertram's mother.

Chris read:

> Then she wrapped a towel around his neck and put him to bed. "Now, maybe I can have some peace," she said. When Burton's father came home from a business trip, he sniffed and said, "I smell goose grease. I hate goose grease!" The giraffe said, "Oh, sorry."

Unconcerned, he then went on to the next page. Since this was not an uncommon response for Chris, and since his mother was curious about what his teacher did in these circumstances, she asked her son's teacher if he ever paraphrased portions of the text as he read aloud. "Oh no, the teacher answered, "Chris would never do that. He's a good reader." Though this makes a statement about the teacher's definition of a good reader, it makes more interesting statements about Chris in particular, and about language users in general. Those statements are that language is a complex social event; that language users are aware of the social nature of language in all of its forms; and that language users are actively involved in the synthesis of this social event (Harste, 1980). In order to explore these statements, we would like to share language stories about three different language users.

The first of these is Shannon, a nineteen-year-old freshman studying theatre arts and speech at Texas Woman's University. Shannon is a good student and always has been. She reads a great deal, and her family values reading and the theatre. One story that Shannon had read was retold in three different situations: to a university professor in his office, to her family at dinner, and to her friend, on a walk to lunch. Though she knew she was being taped when she retold the story to the professor, she was unaware of the tape recorder in the other two situations. Essentially, Shannon retold the story in one test-like situation, and in two situations that were more natural for her.

These retellings differed in several ways. The retelling to the friend is the longest. But after adjusting for all the extra "chit chat" that goes on between friends, the length in words is the same as the other two (See Table 1).

Table 1

LENGTH OF SHANNON'S STORY RETELLING

	Words	Time in Seconds
Test setting	601	241
Family setting	771	307
Friend setting	1038	418

Another difference between the 3 story retellings can be illustrated in terms of idea units (See table 2). Speech is not produced in a flowing stream, but rather in short spurts of language. One needs only to be aware of this fact to actually hear these short "spurts" in someone's speech. These spurts of language have been noted by Halliday (1967), who called them information units; and more recently by Chafe (1980), whose term we adopt here. Idea unit boundaries can be identified through examination of intonation, hesitation, and syntax. Idea units end with a slight rise in pitch, and a brief pause which can last as long as one or two seconds. They generally consist of a single clause. Though the total number of idea units is greatest in her retelling to a friend, a more important measure is the mean length of idea units in words and seconds. In the test situation, her language is short and choppy; in both the family and friend settings, her language is less fragmented and a more spontaneous speech pattern is exhibited.

Table 2

CHARACTERISTICS OF SHANNON'S IDEA UNITS

	Total	$\bar{X}$ Length (Words)	$\bar{X}$ Length (Sec)
Test setting	106	5.67	2.27
Family setting	101	7.63	3.04
Friend setting	140	7.42	2.48

A third difference between Shannon's story retellings can be seen by examining the centers of interest (See Table 3). A center of interest occurs when a speaker's focus is too complex to be conveyed in a single idea unit. In this situation, the speaker strings a series of idea units together, each ending with a rising pitch, until he reaches the end of his center of interest and his pitch falls. In written language this would be comparable to a paragraph. In the test situation, Shannon fully develops a few centers of interest, but in the less formal settings she seems to tell what interests her most.

Table 3

CHARACTERISTICS OF SHANNON'S CENTERS OF INTEREST

	Total	$\bar{X}$ Length (Idea Units)
Test setting	10	10.60
Family setting	27	3.74
Friend setting	43	3.26

The most important difference between the retellings can be seen in terms of the apparent purpose behind each of her idea units (See Table 4).

We identified four primary purposes behind her idea units:

1) Interaction: conversation with others in the setting, which is not closely related to the story ("It was pretty long, about 5 pages.")

2) Recall processes: focus upon the processes of remembering the story, which may serve as a stalling device ("Wel...um...let's see).

3) Retelling: relating the story events, or demonstrating knowledge of the story in some way.

4) Evaluation: making some statement as to the story's worth.

Table 4

COMMUNICATION PURPOSES OF SHANNON'S WITHIN IDEA UNITS

	Interact	Recall	Retell	Evaluate	Total
Test situation	7	25	74	0	106
Family situation	17	3	80	1	101
Friend situation	60	0	77	3	140

In Shannon's three retellings, she interacted more with her friend and her family and used more recall processes in the test setting, which could have been because she was nervous or because she was retelling the story just after she read it. She retold the same amount in all three situations, though there are a number of qualitative differences such as relating moral and character analyses to the professor and telling parts of the story through dialogue to her family and friend, thereby reflecting a much more aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1978). It is tempting to assume that Shannon is able to perceive certain cues in the setting and know just what to tell the professor only because she is a very sophisticated language user. A related and equally tempting assumption is that the less sophisticated language user may

be unable to access and make use of cues to the kinds of language behavior expected by the other persons involved. The invalidity of these assumptions is illustrated by the following account.

James was introduced to us through the probation office of the Brazos County Police. His probation officer described him as "illiterate", and his teachers described him as a "trouble maker"; we will describe him as a language user. On the first day of tutoring, which was mandated by James' probation officer, he was taken around his downtown neighborhood and asked to read anything he could. He read "Turn Right" at a T-intersection displaying this sign:

He read "Bryan Library" on the front of the downtown library and "Good Rich" from the Goodyear sign at the tire store. His interactions with print demonstrated that he was not illiterate, but was interacting with print in his environment with quite a bit of success, even though his probation officer had said "he can't write his name" and his teacher had added "he can't read a lick". After his trip through the neighborhood, James was asked to tell a story which was tape recorded. It turned out to be a very imaginative, detailed basketball story with a dialogue, well-developed plot, good characterization, and a brilliant climax.

> ...So everday he got out of school he go to basketball practice and he go to the stadium, shoot some ball with the team and then after that him and the coach go back home, get up in the morning, go to school, get out of school. So he be doing it for a while.
>
> Often he just came out and met some friends on the road, had some wine bottles. So he just left school. He didn't want to go to school no more. He told the coach he could make it on his own.

Coach said, "That's the way you want it?"
He says, "Yeah."
He says, "All right. That's the way you get it then."
And so he left.

The Basketball Kid, the protagonist of James' story, goes on to get into trouble after breaking into a house and stealing a TV set. The coach, however, rescues him from his bout with the law and his good-for-nothing friends and talks him into returning to school. This story was transcribed and used as instructional material in tutoring sessions during the next several weeks. James read the story under many different conditions: he read along with the tape-recorded telling of the story, read along with his tutor, filled in predictable words or phrases she had deleted in a copy of the transcript, illustrated his work, and wrote captions for his illustrations.

When it was time for some new material, James was asked to tell a new story. This time he told "Paperboy vs. Mailman", which is given in its entirety below.

This boy...was throwing...newspaper...every...see...this boy throwed newspaper every day. And...the mail...the mailman... was...always tries to beat him...to the box. The boy always rode a bike. The mailman had to drive a jeep. And the mailman had to stop for the stop...sign. And the boy...alway...rode his bike...around the curve...on the sidewalk. And...so...they... betted...he I mean...betted...he could beat him. To the mailman. And beat the mailman in. And the boy betted he couldn't. So... the mailman...saw him...coming...at the stop sign. And the mailman...ran...the stop sign...and...the boy...was coming... around...the curve...and the mailman...look...off...see if there was any car was coming. And he drove faster...to the...house. And...he didn't see the...boy on the curve. Hit him.

The second story, even to an ear untrained in articulation variances, was remarkably different from the first. A closer examination of the two stories' language reveals several important differences. A second difference between "The Basketball Kid" and "Mailman Vs. Paperboy" is the sound of verbal-story-telling versus the sound of "print language," as James has encountered it in school. Both stories were replayed for James and he was asked which story he

liked best. James thought the first story was better because it "sounded more like talk." A colleague of our listened to the two stories also. She was under the impression that James was telling the first story, but reading the second story.

The most immediately noticeable difference between story one and two is the fluency and spontaneity in the first story and the halting, hesitating style of the second. The second story contains four long pauses of over three seconds each, as well as several shorter breaks between sentences. By looking at the mean length of idea units in the two stories (See Table 5), one can see what could be heard on tape: the second story was short and choppy - very unlike his first story, which was much more like his spontaneous speech. There are more centers of interest in James' first story, and they are developed more extensively (See Table 6). James doesn't spare the words in reporting details concerning the setting, characters, or plot in "Basketball Kid;" however, "Mailman" contained only the bare threads of a story line.

Table 5

LENGTH OF JAMES' IDEA UNITS IN WORDS AND SECONDS

	"The Basketball Kid"	"Paperboy vs. Mailman"
Idea units	128.0	60.0
$\bar{X}$ no. words per idea unit	6.9	2.7
$\bar{X}$ no. seconds per idea unit	3.7	1.1

Table 6

LENGTH OF JAMES' CENTERS OF INTEREST IN WORDS AND SECONDS

	"The Basketball Kid"	"Paperboy vs. Mailman"
Centers of interest	36.0	18.0
$\bar{X}$ no. words per center of interest	24.5	9.9
$\bar{X}$ no. idea units per center of interest	3.6	3.3

The first story is also much more complex in structure. It contains two distinct narratives (see Figure 1), the first of which serves to set the stage for the second. The two together include a total of 16 ending-embedded episodes, when parsed according to Mandler & Johnson's (1977) story grammer. In contrast, the second story (see Figure 2) includes only a single, simple episode.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

Figure 2

IDEA UNITS IN STORY GRAMMAR CATEGORIES IN

"MAILMAN VS. PAPERBOY"

Setting:	1-27
Episode	
Beginning:	28-35
Complex Reaction:	ø
Attempt:	36-39
Outcome:	40-59
Ending:	60

Figure 1

Idea Units in Story Grammar Categories in "The Basketball Kid" [1]

Narrative 1	Idea Unit No.
Setting:	1-2
Episode 1	
Beginning:	Ø
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	3
Attempt:	4
Outcome:	5
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 2	
Beginning:	6
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	7
Outcome:	8
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 3	
Beginning:	9
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	10
Outcome:	11
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 4	
Beginning:	12-16
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	17-19
Attempt:	20-22
Outcome:	23-36
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 5	
Beginning:	37-38
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	39
Outcome:	40-44
Ending:	45

Narrative 2	Idea Unit No.
Setting:	46-48
Episode 1	
Beginning:	49
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	50
Attempt:	Ø
Outcome:	51
Attempt:	52
Outcome:	53-56
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 2	
Beginning:	57
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	58-59
Outcome:	60
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 3	
Beginning:	61
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	62-64
Attempt:	65-68
Outcome:	69-70
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 4	
Beginning:	71-72
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	73
Outcome:	74
Attempt:	75
Outcome:	76-77
Attempt:	78
Outcome:	79
Attempt:	80
Outcome:	81-85
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 5	
Beginning:	86-87
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	88a
Attempt:	88b
Outcome:	89a
Outcome:	89b
Ending:	All that follows

	Idea Unit No.
Episode 6	
Beginning:	90-97
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	98-99
Outcome:	100-102
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 7	
Beginning:	103
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	104
Outcome:	105-106
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 8	
Beginning:	107-108
Simple Reaction:	109
Goal:	110
Attempt:	111
Outcome:	112-113a
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 9	
Beginning:	113b
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	114
Outcome:	115-116
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 10	
Beginning:	117
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	118-119
Outcome:	120-121
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 11	
Beginning:	122-125
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	126
Outcome:	127
Ending:	128-130

Why are the two stories so different? When we explained to our colleague that James was also telling the second story and not reading it, we realized that in that second story he was trying to create what he thought was expected of him: another story to be written down and used for reading instruction. The different language setting (the tutor as teacher now rather than just a friend driving around in a car with him) and the different assignment (tell a story to be used for reading rather than just tell a story) caused James to produce a story that he thought would be appropriate for reading instruction, based on his years of experience with classroom reading material.

In general terms, the major features of a language setting may be described under the three headings of field, tenor and mode (Halliday, 1978). The field is the total contextual event consisting of the subject matter, the text and the purpose of the speaker or writer. Tenor refers to the relevant social interaction and relations among or between the participants. The mode is the spoken or written channel used to express language and the function of the language used in the situation. Together these three terms may be used as a framework for describing the language settings in which James and his tutor were participants.

On the surface there would appear to be no change in the language setting. They were working in the same location; the same two individuals were interacting; the same assignment (tell a story) was given into the same tape recorder. However, a closer examination indicates that the language setting actually was significantly altered.

In the initial stages of tutoring, James and his tutor drove around his downtown neighborhood and a nearby business district reading various signs, talking about his family and hers, and searching for a certain motorcycle of interest to him. As a result, they adopted certain social roles not typically

associated with a tutoring situation. The print, which functions within the total event, was restricted to that which they encountered along their journey through the neighborhood. Their communication purposes were to establish a groundwork for future communication, to ascertain what print James could process, and to establish a place and time for meeting to read together. In general, the features of the situation were not common to most tutorial contexts; the two participants developed a cordial, peer-to-peer relationship based on a shared exploration of each other's backgrounds and interests, and of the environmental print that James could handle because of its relevance to his own interests and purposes. The story James produced in this setting was "The Basketball Kid."

To return briefly to our poker metaphor, it was at this point that a new "hand" was dealt to James. As his tutor began to adopt a more comfortable "teacher" role after several weeks, the field had become limited to dealing more specifically with reading and writing instructional activities, many of which focused on his own story in print and taped forms. The functions of speaking and writing through most of the later tutorial sessions might be described as instructionally-based; this tended to alter their roles as participants from friend-friend to instructor-pupil. The purposes each had for speaking or writing were narrowed to the tutor's instructing/guiding/questioning/clarifying and James' answering/inquiring (as for clarification). Generally, the features of the situation much more closely resembled those found in a typical classroom setting where the teacher is working one-to-one or one-to-few and in some instances even in large group instruction. And the story produced in this language setting was "Mailman vs. Paperboy."

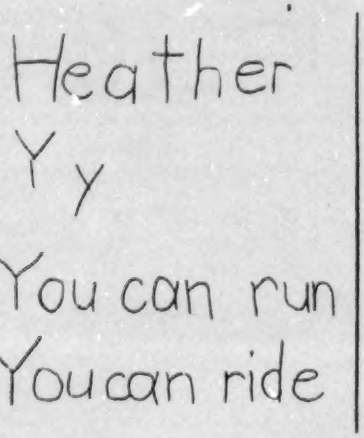
Language is a socio-psycholinguistic process (Harste and Carey, 1979). The text is always an integral part of the situational context or language

setting, and must be considered in light of the subject matter, the purpose of the speaker/writer and reader/listener, the participant roles, and the function of the language used in the situation. The concepts of field, tenor and mode serve to characterize the language setting. Functioning within this context, language users will sample or construct language that is coherent with the situational context and also with itself (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

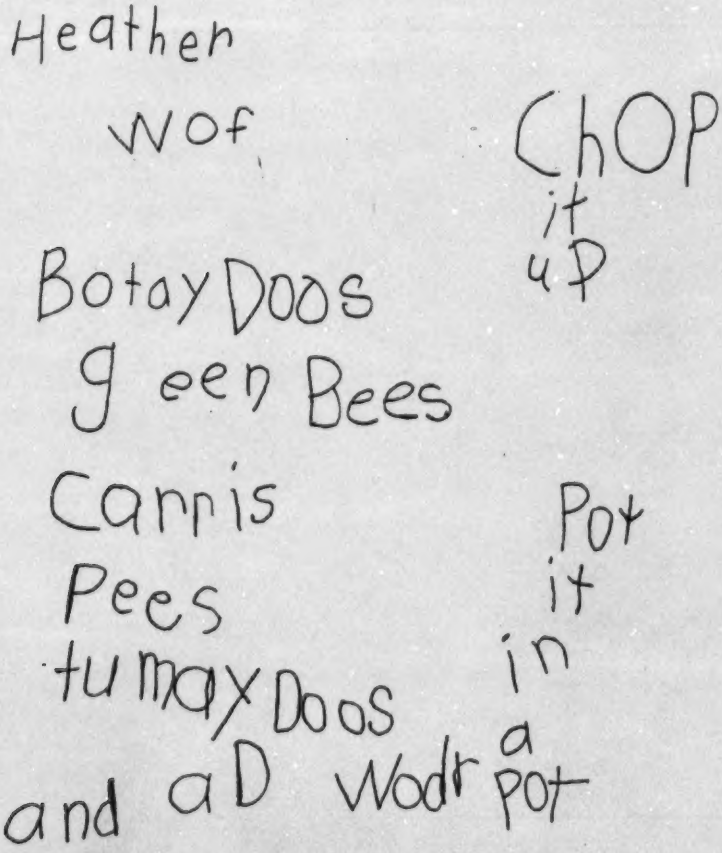
In the initial settings, where the participants were more on an equal footing and where purposes for language use as well as the written language actually encountered were not directly instruction-based, James told a real, vivid, well-developed story. But when the setting began to take on a more instructional character, James shifted to a set of rules for language use that he had developed in earlier instructional settings. Interviews and informal conversations with James during the earlier tutoring sessions revealed that as a "nonreader," he had been exposed to print materials with rigid syntactic controls and little story development. Further, he had learned to be very cautious in dealing with written language, in order to avoid error. This was not only reflected in his hesitant delivery while telling "Mailman vs. Paperboy," but also in his obvious discomfort when asked to write. Thus, the two stories James told were consistent with his perceptions about the "rules" which operate in their respective settings, as well as internally-consistent examples of two very different kinds of texts.

In one last language story (Moss & Stansell, 1983), we would like to share some writing by Heather, who just turned six. According to Heather, people write at school to learn their letters and words; and they write at home because they like to - "you know, like letters to people and stuff like

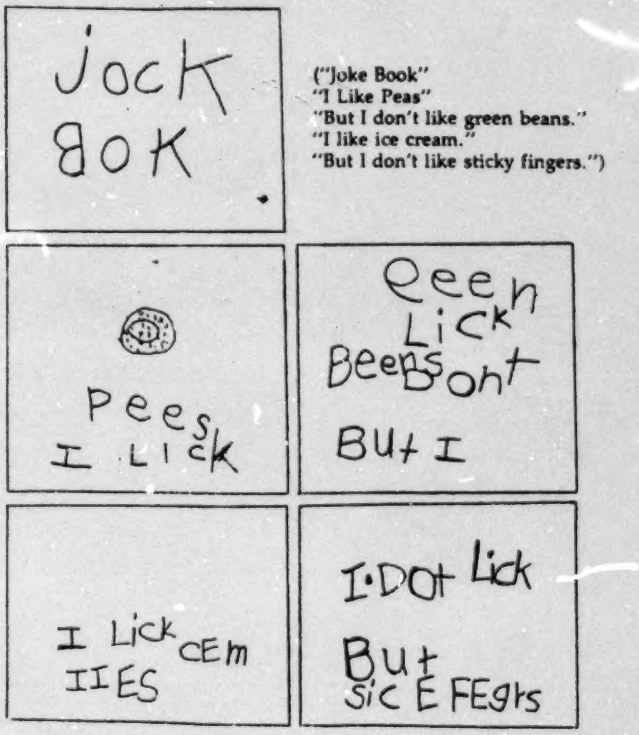
that." In fact, Heather's teacher does assign writing to teach letters and words as the sample below indicates.



But after an adult friend read "The Three Little Pigs" with her, Heather wrote a recipe. This is a recipt for wolf stew -- the three little pigs used it when having a "guest" for dinner.



During an earlier visit, she even wrote her grown-up friend a joke book.



("Joke Book"
"I Like Peas"
"But I don't like green beans."
"I like ice cream."
"But I don't like sticky fingers.")

At six, Heather has already figured out that school setting demands a particular type of writing, and at home you can pursue a number of different options. Language users of any age or level of development have many past experiences related to language use and language learning. They perceive the salient restrictions of the language setting - whether these restrictions are teacher-imposed, as in Heather's case; or are self-imposed, based on past instruction, as in cases of Shannon and James. When language users of any age are restricted by teachers who want to hear just the theme, plot, and main characters, by teachers who assign only reading material which is artificially controlled, or by teachers who only assign writing so students will learn their letters and words, they are restricted to only a small portion of the language options otherwise

accessible to them. If we want to see how well learners can deal with the range of options open to them, and if we want to provide the opportunities for them to develop into skillful users of a variety of authentic written language forms, we have to lift some of the restrictions. We have to let them write and read and tell stories limited only by their own linguistic resources, rather than by our own restrictions imposed upon them.

As reading teachers, "dealers" in the language processing game, we need to examine the language settings in which we place our students. A few well-chosen alterations can produce a noticeable change in students' willingness and ability to be effective language users. Students may be asked to write and read for more natural purposes -- to write letters to a pen pal, for example, or to read in order to learn how to build a terrarium. A fourth grade class can read and write to first or second grade children or to less successful readers within their own classrooms. The students can share favorite stories by reading or telling them to parents or older student volunteers. They can exchange written notes and messages with the teacher and with each other through a class Post Office. Sharing stories through puppet shows and dramatization can encourage students to experiment with language as they step outside themselves to portray another character.

Children can be asked to read material that was not written for the purpose of reading instruction: trade books, magazines, song lyrics, comics, newspapers, catalogs, directions. In general, the print we ask our students to read and the writing we ask them to produce should be real language, written for a real purpose and kept in its original context. Maybe as we realize that we are conducting a poker-like language game, we will also realize that if we want students to play a good game they will have to start with a good deck of

cards -- language that is interesting, whole, and natural, written for a purpose and read for that purpose.

Students can then be asked to read and write in a variety of settings, rather than only within the classroom. Within the classroom, written language can be produced and read in settings where only students participate. Teachers can develop new patterns of interacting with students so that they become interested partners in the process of language use, rather than seekers of error and judges of each and every instance of student language. As the "dealers" in the language game, we would then be setting forth rules that are not only more familiar to the students, but also more applicable to the real uses of language as it occurs in their world.

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FOOTNOTE

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